



School Counselors Must Gain an Increased Capacity to Serve Students Directly

IDRA Testimony for Senate Bill 179, relating to the use of public school counselors' work time. Presented by Christina Quintanilla-Muñoz before Senate Committee on Education on March 18, 2021.

Dear Chairman Taylor and Honorable Members of the Senate Education Committee:

My name is Christina Quintanilla-Muñoz, and I serve as an Education Policy Fellow at IDRA (Intercultural Development Research Association). We are an independent, non-partisan, education non-profit committed to achieving equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college. We are in support of SB 179 to maximize school counselors' capacities and increase students' access to on-campus professional school counselors in our public schools across the state of Texas.

We greatly appreciate Senator Lucio's leadership with SB 179 and in responding to the growing need for accessible and effective counseling support in schools, particularly in response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student's mental health and wellness.

Mental health and wellness are topics of great relevance and prioritization for our K-12 students experiencing higher levels of anxiety, depression, and trauma than ever before. In the early months of the pandemic, mental health-related visits for children in the United States age 5 to 11 increased 24% and for those 12 to 17 increased 31% compared to 2019 trends (CDC, 2020). The need for increased school mental health resources is urgent.

In our research, IDRA has found increased access to school counselors and other on-campus professionals, including social workers, school psychologists, and other specialized instructional supports is a vital, critical solution to improving campus climate, promoting student safety, and ensuring student academic and life success. SB 179 addresses parents, teachers, and school leaders' recommendations to increase access to school counselors in order to promote healthy and sustainable learning environments.

Additionally, broader research demonstrates that campuses who offer comprehensive school counseling programs, such as those endorsed in the Texas Model for Comprehensive School Counseling Programs set forth in Chapter 33 of the Education Code, have improved academic performance, fewer disciplinary referrals, and greater participation in postsecondary education. IDRA's annual attrition study reveals Texas is failing to graduate one out of five students indicating the statewide attrition rate is 21% (IDRA, 2021).

With an overwhelming workload that includes academic counseling, post-secondary guidance and planning, and other administrative responsibilities, school counselors are strained to provide mental health and social emotional support for students. SB 179 sets a goal that at least 80% of school counselors' time be dedicated to delivering comprehensive school counseling programs

according to districts' standards. It does not mandate districts to adopt this 80% policy nor require districts to hire more counselors. It does require that each school district utilizes the expertise and experience school counselors bring to each campus most effectively and that each school board establishes the best policies to "increase student and staff safety on campus."

In Texas, school counselors must hold a master's level degree from an accredited institution and have a minimum of two years of classroom teaching experience, which means they are both educators and mental health professionals (TSCA, 2021). Allowing school counselors to focus most of their time on direct interactions with students to deliver counseling services maximizes their potential.

School counselors are an essential part of students' on-campus support system. We must increase school counselors' capacity to deliver critical social-emotional and academic supports through comprehensive school counseling programs that equitably promote student success and achievement.

The 86th Senate Education Committee demonstrated strong leadership in successfully passing this bill last session, and we urge you to consider passing SB 179 this session.

Recommendations

IDRA recommends the committee:

- Maximize the capacity of school counselors by allowing them to focus 80% of their schedule working directly with students to deliver comprehensive school counseling programs modeled after the Texas Model for Comprehensive School Counseling Programs set forth by Chapter 33 of the Education Code.
- Support policies that promote healthy, safe, and enriching school environments
- Support policies that foster student mental health and wellness ensure student and family needs are identified, addressed, and met.
- Support policies that promote robust social and emotional learning to help children learn how to appropriately manage their emotions, regulate behaviors, and cope with various life stressors.

IDRA is available for any questions or further resources that we can provide. Thank you for your consideration. For more information, please contact Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D., IDRA Deputy Director of Policy, at chloe.sikes@idra.org.

IDRA is an independent, non-profit organization led by Celina Moreno, J.D. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college. IDRA strengthens and transforms public education by providing dynamic training; useful research, evaluation, and frameworks for action; timely policy analyses; and innovative materials and programs.